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Mobility becoming migration:

Understanding youth spatiality in the twenty-first century

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The aim of this chapter, and the next, is to provide readers of with an expanded introduction of sorts, engaging with prominent theoretical themes in the study of youth spatiality. Of particular interest is appreciating the relationship between our two main terms of reference, migration and mobility; the former having a certain gravitas, the latter a more youthful and carefree aura. This chapter will however show that the distinction between these two modalities is artificial and detrimental to our appreciation of youth spatiality, with mobility and migration being linked both literally and imaginatively. While the intention is certainly not to reinvent the entire youth mobility research field, we can provide some ideas for a conceptual rethink, starting with acknowledgement of the importance of integrating mobility with migration, and vice versa, moving towards outlining a youth mobility paradigm capable of accommodating a diverse range of perspectives. This includes drawing upon evidence from the Global North and Global South, and both long duration and fixed term forms of exchange.

At a theoretical level, a union of sorts is hence proposed, uniting the different mobility practices that take place within an individual biography, starting in the youth phase. In the past, specific exercises of mobility have tended to be presented by researchers as discreet exercises;

for example, student exchangees, international internship or work placements. However, looking at mobility episodes in isolation tends to underestimate their significance. These exercises may have value at the time of their undertaking, in acquiring new skills or credentials, but it is only when this formative mobility is conjoined with later in life mobility episodes that the importance of what has gone before is revealed, the antecedents having enabling the subsequent sojourns to happen, thus establishing a spatial continuum. What is being learnt in the present may therefore have a bearing upon the future, creating a long duration, if intermittent, migration trajectory out of what may have appeared to be unrelated, even ephemeral experiences. The idea then is that an accumulation of short duration or circulatory mobility episodes now becomes migration; that young people learn how to be migrants through being mobile.

Mobility becoming migration

What then does this mean for mobile young people? The impression created by reading the chapters of this book is that a change took place in the practice of migration at some time in the twenty-first century, due perhaps to the proliferation of opportunities for undertaking mobility while young and the relative openness of national borders at this time. That specific mobility practices were presented as being discrete from one another obscures the connections that exist between these episodes, and downplays the fact that it is generally up to individual young people who must put together these disparate pieces as part of a 'do-it-yourself' approach, rather than external institutions and agencies who only focus upon the mobility that happens under their auspices.[1]

There are many examples in this book of mobility becoming migration. As an illustration, we can consider the chapter of Sahizer Samuk and colleagues. Using interview material from Romania, Norway and Luxembourg, taken from a recently completed European

Commission funded study, they illustrate how student mobility acts as an 'eye-opener' for new experiences, broadening awareness of a wide range of future possibilities, with the value of the experience emerging not immediately but rather many years later. In regard to how this happens, the antecedent mobility contributes to the development of new competences and teaches young people how to overcome the difficulties that invariably arise after moving abroad. The basic idea then is that 'mobility produces mobility' (Samuk et al., 2021), and participating in one programme can lead to joining another; in the case of this chapter, an important nuance is the revelation that it is often the same people who participate in different schemes operating under the Erasmus+ umbrella, which supports mobility at different points in a career trajectory, across a wide range of locations.

Elsewhere in the world, mobility practices may be more isolated from one another, disconnected from a unifying narrative. Thais França and Beatriz Padilla (2021) look at the experiences of students travelling from Portuguese-speaking African countries to Brazil, as part of a mobility programme operated by the University for International Integration of the Afro-Brazilian Lusophony (UNILAB). Their analysis highlights the importance of new mobility trajectories for learners in the Global South, but also acknowledges some of the difficulties students have in the host institution and community due to a lack of social integration, something that may limit the impact emergent forms of mobility have on the likelihood of making subsequent moves abroad. What may happen is that they remain mobile students rather than become future migrants, making the exchange experience a one-off adventure rather than a preliminary stage in a settlement process (see also Prazeres, 2013). Therefore, not everyone can learn how to be a migrant through being mobile at the same pace or in the same manner, with possible disadvantages present due to spatial location and/or socio-demographic background.[2]

A new youth migration paradigm: The spatial consumer

The impression emerging from these initial reflections on the work contained in this book is that a new and much more inclusive youth migration paradigm is required for theorizing a fuller range of spatial practices among youth. This paradigm needs to integrate existing knowledge, especially about classic forms of migration, such as economic and political motivated circulation, and be capable of accommodating recent developments such as the expansion of student mobility systems, the emergence of spatialized training programmes and the imperative many young people face in regard to seeking employment opportunities abroad. We also need to accept that certain individuals become mobile out of a striving to become part of what they imagine as a cosmopolitan elite, and that they may need to be able to cope with a high level of precariousness. And fundamentally, this new model should reject binary categorizations between 'mobility' and 'migration,' instead emphasising the connections and evident fluidity of youth spatiality.

So how then might we build this new paradigm? As a starting point, there is much that can be retained from traditional views on migration since people continue to move between countries for quite obvious reasons; for example, to escape from economic hardship or political unrest in one's present place of residence. We might want to acknowledge regional differences in mobility norms and values; that many want to move away from poverty and towards prosperity, whether this is movement from the Global South to the Global North or within these regions. And we can also consider what have become mainstream forms of youth mobility, especially for students, but not without glossing over the negative aspects of these experiences alongside celebrating the alleged wonderfulness of internationalization.

Another valuable observation concerns the interpolation of leisure and notions of self-actualization, especially into work and training abroad. In this book, being able to think of the experience as an extended holiday and an opportunity for self-improvement is cited at an

inspiration for undertaking vocational mobility by Pantea (2021), and in temporary work migration to Australia, Canada and New Zealand by Ghazarian (2021). Further obfuscation of hidden costs may take place through disguising a migration pathway as some kind of a 'rite of passage' (see also Ho et al., 2014; Yoon, 2014). Such moves are seen, by some, as a challenge to prove oneself, and for others, as a chance to build understanding and new connections with people in new places. In both cases, mobility is seen as an opportunity for personal growth (Clarke, 2004). This helps explain why the contemporary migrant comes to be seen as a spatial consumer: making reflexive choices based on what fits their personal and professional needs and desires. Equally significant is the fact that mobile subjects subject themselves to a form of self-discipline, or reflexive entrepreneurialism, responding to a mobility imperative associated with the neoliberal governance of education, training systems and labour markets (see Filippi et al., 2021).

It is important to state that this means of conceptualizing migration is very much in its incipient stages and difficult to attain, and even harder to sustain. One reason, as outlined by Syed Zwick (2021) in her chapter is the challenge involved in investing mobility capital. She details the frustration felt by many graduates from Central Asia who find their plans for moving to 'the West' thwarted by various barriers and limitations, most prominently, the lack of access to foreign job markets. There are however signs of pragmatism among spatial consumers. For example, work with Thai students has revealed that they may temporarily work abroad in Australia as a means to explore life in the country before moving there permanently (Wattancharoensil and Talawanich, 2018). In looking for illustrations of other new ways of practicing migration, the chapter of Vasiliki Toumanidou (2021), focusing on Greek postgraduate students' migration from Greece to the United Kingdom, shows how their decision-making is been influenced by multiple factors, mostly as a first step in a broader migration project.[3] This chapter also draws parallels between these students' decision-making

processes and the idea of 'liquid migration' (Engbersen and Snel, 2013), a perspective that harks back to ideas in Anglophone sociology associated with the work of Zygmunt Bauman.

Putting the 'new migrant' who operates within this framework into economic terms, he or she is an idealized neoliberal subject; the spatial self-entrepreneur. Self-financing, self-motivating but perhaps also somewhat self-centred. Borrowing a few ideas from Emrullah Yasin Çiftçi and A. Cendel Karaman (2021) in Chapter 35, we can see this person as a kind of 'homo mobilicus,' in not just meeting the current but anticipating the future demands of the neoliberal labour market. Not only flexible about what they do, but where they do it. Durations. Destinations. Social and family relationships. All reframed by the search for elusive foundations and depth, and a wish to move beyond the touristic surfaces of over-familiar environments.

The success of mobility and migration

Why then does youth mobility, in all its forms, concern us as social scientists? While there are no reliable and comprehensive statistics available, it is safe to assume that the global mobile youth population encompasses millions of individuals. In explaining this popularity, it is hard to ignore association with individualized success, whether in material forms or less tangible aspects of personal development. The idea of moving abroad as a means to accumulate wealth is certainly familiar, with more implicit forms of success expressed through ideas such as cosmopolitanism and interculturality, as well as the positive connotations mobility acquires through its association with leisure. Spatial mobility thereby comes to be thought of as a relatively pleasurable means of fostering personal and professional growth, becoming tied to social mobility and, at a greater stretch, the idea becoming a hyper-mobile global citizen (Czerska-Shaw and Krzaklewska, 2021).[4]

Despite its eminent desirability, the growing popularity of youth mobility has not necessarily been benign for societies. On the contrary, certain forms of spatiality have been conceptualized in terms of their potential to create social distinctions between those on the move and their stay-at-home counterparts, benefitting the former at the expense of the latter, generating not levelling social inequalities.[5] In the past, a mobility interregnum was used as a kind of moratorium phase for the children of the bourgeoisie; travelling abroad for a substantial period of time between secondary and tertiary education, or as a postgraduate intermission, sometimes described rather literally as a 'gap year' (Simpson, 2004; Vogt, 2018; see also Henriksson, 2021). While no doubt interesting for the participants, such practices could be detrimental to social cohesion and served to define the mobile citizen as a divisive and disruptive individual, a feeling of superiority generated at the expense of the members of host communities and peers left at home. In other words, youth mobility as an elitist practice (see also Heath, 2007; Bagnoli, 2009; King, 2011).

Mobility today is, we hope, not always an exclusive practice but the association with individualized and exceptional success remains strong, something that in itself can become a cause for concern when expectations are unrealistic or influenced by misleading information. In fact, rather than become members of a global migratory elite, geographically mobile young people may end up integrating themselves deeper into an internationalized precariat, a theme already extensively explored in youth transitions literature.[6] Many of the contributions to this book will therefore revisit the relationship mobility has with success and failure, in a broader range of contexts, covering the Global South as well as the Global North.

Conclusion: Mobility becoming migration and migration becoming mobility

Since young people seem to have been practicing migration differently in the twenty-first century, at least compared to how we imagined migration to happen in the past, it is logical

that we might want to update our understanding. This explains why there is an imperative to create a paradigm that simultaneously integrates mobility and migration, with these two modalities seen as intrinsically linked, the former constructed out of fragments of the latter. Young people, especially those in education, work and training, seem to be the pioneers in this respect. For them, mobility is familiar, especially in such short duration episodic formats, and it may be the more solid and long-form types of migration that provide novelty. It is however noticeable that young people themselves find it difficult to articulate the meaning of their actions. As Pustulka and Winogrodzka note in their chapter, even where they do not move abroad for strictly economic reasons, the manner in which they explain their mobility and how their stories are narrated by external parties is tied to the 'old language' that somewhat disparages the idea of becoming a migrant (Pustulka and Winogrodzka, 2021).

It can also be difficult for young people to escape the old migration categories, especially for those moving between the Global North and Global South through irregular channels. This extends to the ability to move out of problematized migration categories and into 'softer' mobility categories. In this book, Marcela Boutros and colleagues look at the reception and integration of refugees in the Italian higher education system. Their account underlines the importance of tertiary education as a means to 'escape' the refugee category, through developing valuable skills and aptitudes (Boutros et al., 2021). Drawing on in-depth ethnographic research, Mara Clemente, meanwhile looks at how socio-economic and educational background continues to affect young people's experiences, equating certain mobility practices with human trafficking, including exploration of forced labour. What emerges from her analysis is the view that categories such as 'voluntary' migrant and 'trafficked' migrant rely on over-simplistic assumptions and are binary and static understandings of how mobility works, with an evident dichotomy reflecting legal and public discourses rather than migrants' voices (Clemente, 2021). Discourses of migration and

mobility may therefore hide forms of coercion that have become deeply embedded in policymaking.

The present does not efface the past in our theorization, with the simultaneous existence of old and new forms and representations of migration recognized in the same paradigm. We can now see young people's migration as characterized by temporality, flexibility, fluidity and open-endedness, and perhaps a sense of placelessness and social disembeddedness (see also Castells, 1996). This also helps explain why they may feel a pronounced sense of transience during mobility (Cranston, 2016), since the journey never feels as if it has been completed. 'Migration' is always a work-in-progress, neither easy or cost free. The downside of being a peripatetic self-entrepreneur is not only the separation from family and friends that inevitably ensues from spending time living in another country but also the financial cost of undertaking successive mobility phases, with balancing these costs and benefits an unavoidable aspect of youth spatiality in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. While the term 'learning mobility' is frequently used by policymakers and civic society agencies, especially at European level, its significance is usually misunderstood. Learning mobility is not just about moving the learning environment to another country and promoting intercultural encounters but also about acquiring practical skills and gathering knowledge about how to migrate.

2. The limitations of the idea that mobility is divorced from migration can be described in terms of liminality (see, e.g., Butcher, 2011; Cranston, 2016); being perpetually stationed at a threshold position to a society without fully entering. In this sense, over-definition as 'mobility' leads to being stuck in a kind of stand-by position in society, lacking the benefits of a 'migrant' designation and the prospect of permanent settlement. Therefore, 'mobility' becomes

inherently unstable, and perhaps unsustainable due to the high cost of maintaining a holding position.

3. Their specific intention is to enhance employability and career prospects through social and cultural capital accumulation, a perspective that is similar to what takes place in many undergraduate exchanges (see Cairns et al. 2018).

4. We might see this idea, or ideal, as the youth equivalent to the idea of becoming a mythical 'Eurostar.' See Favell (2008).

5. This can be regarded as another long-standing theme in youth mobility research. See especially Murphy-Lejeune (2002).

6. For example, in a book entitled, *The Consequences of Mobility*, to which two authors to this collection contributed (David Cairns and Valentina Cuzzocrea), we argued that the expectation of individualized success helped drive highly qualified young Europeans abroad, but often resulted in disrupting rather than enhancing an educational or career trajectory due to a failure to take into account the unpredictability of outcomes (Cairns et al., 2017).

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